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ABSTRACT

Teachers need not drop entirely the nonliterary aspects of classroom talk and response to put students back in touch with the aesthetic role of classroom reading. Affect is the "gut reaction" a reader experiences when his or her raw emotions are touched. This first level of response must be acknowledged, even encouraged, before moving on to the second level, that of association. Beneath the surface response lie memories and reflections, associations in the form of stories or anecdotes which can form the basis of real understanding of students' response to various pieces of literature. Students need a variety of nonthreatening opportunities to express these associations. Students can keep a reading process journal, in which entries can be handled not as finished pieces of writing to be graded, but merely as explorations and attempts to get closer to what happens during and after reading. The following categories suggest some possible prompts to help students perceive the connection between reading and writing, and respond honestly: memory, belief, feelings, sharing, and meaning. In practice, the journal entries may take on many directions, often blending emotion and analysis. Later students may be encouraged to review their entries and select one or several that they can "flesh-out" into fuller pieces of written discourse. The journals can also serve as a catalyst for open dialogue in the classroom. (HTH)

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How Did You Like It? The Question of Student Response and Literature

How many times have we walked into our classrooms and said to students, "Well, how did you like the story you read for today?" And what has happened. Did students answer quickly and eagerly or did they just sit there--waiting. Most of us probably do not expect a response, but we keep tossing out the question from force of habit and a forlorn hope that some one, some time, somewhere, will respond.

As English teachers we have been trained, even possibly overtrained, to think of reading as an analytical act, one which calls for delving into the various aspects of a work (the period in which it was written, the life of the author, the style of the writing) to determine the work's meaning. Then, perhaps, we transfer our discoveries into the form of a critical essay. Although there is nothing fundamentally wrong with such activity--after all, it brought those of us who are voracious readers of literature to this point in our careers--it may not be the most appropriate route for many of the students with whom we meet daily.

For most of our students, reading is not a major concern in their world. If reading is important, it's for determining what movie is playing, how the local or national sports teams are doing, or perhaps what important people, especially in the entertainment field, are doing. There may exist a thirst for basic information related to cars, fashions, stereo equipment, computers or other hobbies or interests. But the key to whatever reading is done on a voluntary basis by students is that it provides them with information for aspects of their lives which they believe to be important. To many students, their personal lives seem quite unrelated to the majority of selections that appear in the classroom literature

anthology, even though we may have made attempts to select pieces we believe should come close to matching their needs and interests.

One of the basic tenets about reading, which has become obscured, however is that all readers, no matter how sophisticated, begin their response to what they read on the basis of a subjective reaction to the experience of the text. Louise Rosenblatt in THE READER, THE TEXT, AND THE POEM (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978) suggests that there are two types of reading response, the efferent, or non-literary reading, and the aesthetic, or literary reading.

> In nonaesthetic reading, the reader's attention is focused primarily on what will remain as residue after the reading--the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out.... In aesthetic (literary) reading, in contrast, the reader's primary concern is what happens during the actual reading event.... In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text. (pp. 23 and 24-25)

We tend to emphasize the nonaesthetic reading in our classrooms by giving students the impression that instant recall is most important; therefore, discussion of a reading assignment becomes more like an inquisition with the prosecutor--the teacher--firing questions at the defendants--the students--who, in turn, afraid they will incriminate themselves, refuse to answer. The sad part about this distortion of the response to reading is that both students and adults know that what happens most frequently in the classroom is not what happens outside. Given the ability to read--and most of us have <u>that</u> without question--we have learned unconsciously to read aesthetically. Whether we learned this from watching television, going to movies, listening to people tell stories or from being read to, we have acquired the ability to enter a piece of literature as an experience in its own right. If we doubt this, we should check in the backpockets of adolescents or in their pocketbooks; far

more often than we might expect, there will be a paperback there. Even students who have difficulty reading school texts for information can read fiction; it may not be Hawthorne or Melville--more likely it will be gothic fiction for the girls and science fiction for the boys--but, ironically, the selections were made more on their potential for the aesthetic experience than the efferent one.[1]

Because this dichotomy exists, we need to become more aware of how to put students back in touch with the aesthetic role of reading done for the classroom. We do not need to drop entirely the nonliterary aspects of classroom talk and response, but since our response as readers is essentially aesthetic in the first reading, that is where we should concentrate our efforts for bringing the two types of response into sharper focus.

One of the exciting aspects of reading often overlooked by students, as well as many adults, is that once we complete the "reading" of a text, we are not necessarily finished with it, any more than we may be finished with an experience that occurs in our lives. Often we turn that experience around and around in our minds, seeking new angles on it, replaying certain parts to see how the roles might be changed. In other words, if something interests us or affects us in some way, we are quite free to reflect, reconstruct and interpret, and in the process come to a better understanding of what might not have been as clear in the beginning. Therefore, reading should be first a conversation between text and reader in which the reader asks questions of his or her own design and seeks answers and makes comments.

How, then, do we go about developing student response to literature which stresses the reader's involvement with the text and the reactions to that involvement. David Bleich in Readings and Feelings, An Introduction to Subjective Criticism (NCTE, 1975) suggests that we capitalize on "two basic components which contribute to any individual's emotional response to anything--affect and association."

Affect may be described as the "gut reaction" we experience when our raw emotions are touched: anger, jealousy, envy, contentment; it also tends to be what people mention when asked how they are feeling about something--"I cried during that movie" or "I really felt sad when the father went away." Teachers will quickly recognize this level of response in student comments such as "I hated this story" or "I liked the story okay I guess." Students making such responses usually do not follow with any specific explanation; in fact, conversations seem to terminate quickly after statements of affect have been made. But it is this first level of response that must be acknowledged, even encouraged, before we can move to the second, that of association. Student readers need to have the opportunity to register their emotional reactions to reading. Implicit, then, in our question of "How did you like it" is an invitation to respond on the affective level. However, students have learned that if they do rise to that bait, frequently an inquisition follows in which the teacher tries to pinpoint the reaction, and almost always this search serves not as an exploration of the student's feelings or the sources of those feelings, but simply as a check of whether or not the student read the story.

Still, to actually understand affective responses, we need to have an understanding of what prompted them. A student who says, "That story made me feel good" or "I really understood how the character felt right then" provides only a hint. Beneath the surface response, memories and reflection lie which fed the response and those associations are what makes the reading an aesthetic experience. Most often these associations are in the form of "stories" or anecdotes, and it is these anecdotal associations, or "analogies" as Bleich calls them, which can form the basis for real understanding of students' response to various pieces of literature. Once again, however, these associations are not rendered willingly by most students because that calls for sharing a bit of themselves. Few of us are ready to volunteer explanations of our feelings when

in a group of people who are, for the most part, strangers. Of course, we are not talking here about simply telling everything or anything--a condition which sometimes occurs in the early grades' sessions of show and tell. There's a discipline in subjective response that comes from trying to explain the association between text, reader and response clearly.

Because many students bring so much unnecessary literary baggage with them, trying to engage students directly in personal responses to literature tends not to work well. Instead, students need a variety of non-threatening opportunities to ease into this perspective. One possible approach may lie in what James Britton and others[2] have come to call the "expressive mode" of discourse-- the kind of writing which comes directly from the writer's experience into words and which assumes a direct concern with the writer, rather than with some other purpose. The joining of reading and writing as a part of subjective response, therefore, seems quite logical. We must remember, though, that the forms and modes of expressive discourse are rooted, as the reader/writer's emotions are, in the response to an experience rather than in imitation or re-creation of forms discovered by objective analysis.

All of us have been in the classroom long enough to realize that students will not perceive readily the connection between reading and writing nor that they will necessarily respond honestly at first when invited to do so. For this reason, they may need some prompts and ample opportunity to practice. Perhaps the easiest way to introduce students to this way of responding is through the keeping of a reading process journal. If entries in this journal are handled not as finished pieces of writing to be graded, but merely as explorations and attempts to get closer to what happens during and after the reading, the entries will provide useful information about the progress students are making in dealing with their subjective responses to reading.

The following categories and questions suggest some of the possible prompts

that might be used with students.[3]

Memory

When we finish reading a piece of literature, quite often we discover that particular thoughts flash through our minds, such as "I can't believe that old man reminded me so much of my grandfather." Explore such connections between the text and your memories--what are the similarities or differences? Can you focus, perhaps, on one incident or anecdote that seems to explain the connections?

Belief

Most of us have strong opinions or beliefs about the number of things in our lives. Perhaps it is hard to put those beliefs into words without their sounding a bit like slogans: prejudice destroys people; adults don't understand teenagers, etc. But if you found some of your beliefs surfacing as you read, talk about them--what prompted them to surface? Where did those beliefs originate? How did those beliefs affect your response to the story? To what extent do you find your own life reflecting those beliefs?

Feelings

Reading tends to be an emotional experience if we get involved with literature at all. Some pieces of literature, of course, engage us more deeply than others. A key statement, action, word or idea can cause a strong emotion in us--a feeling of anger, sadness, or pleasure perhaps. What is it in this work which prompted strong emotion or even, possibly, a lack of feeling? Why does it affect you this way? Does such an emotional response surprise you or not?

Sharing

Suppose you read a piece of literature and there's no one around to share it with? How do you feel? If people were available, what would you want to say about the piece? What would be going on in your mind before you spoke about your reading? To what extent would past experience in talking about literature shape your oral response? What happens when you talk about your reading that affects your recall of the reading experience?

Meaning

To what extent do you discover meaning already in a piece of literature? To what extent do you think you place meaning in what you read? How would you describe this latter process if it occurs? Where does your "meaning" come from?

In practice, the journal entries take many directions, often blending emotion and analysis, a combination, of course, that we are pleased to see. For instance, in one class students were asked to read the "Introduction" to Studs Terkel's Working (Random House, 1974) and then "free write" on the subject of work. During the next class they were asked to write their interpretation of the "Introduction" itself and then a third journal assignment asked them to compare the previous two entries. Here are one student's responses, including a fourth unassigned journal response.[4]

#1 Work! ....Why are we so geared to money in our society? Almost everyone works out of necessity and not many people like their jobs. I don't thing Americans are so decadent, but it leaves me with the question that maybe there is an alternate method of happiness and survival...without so much emphasis put on work. Work has different meanings...A construction worker doesn't think of a bank teller as a working man or woman.

#2 The essay "Introduction" is probably a true feeling among workers in America today...but I was disturbed by the sense of pessimism.... Using a topic like "What's Wrong with America" and letting Mr. Terkel write it, you would think he studied under H.L. Mencken, of that I have no doubt. I wonder if Mr. Terkel would be as... explicit and adamant if he (did) some work on what's good and right with America? Sardonic, acerbic words and writing usually tell us what we already know and will admit.... Too often the creators of these works never give us any solutions to the problems...I seem to have gotten off on a tangent I really didn't mean to...

#3 When completing the free-writing assignment last Friday about Work I felt, after reading the essay by Studs Terkel, that a lot of the people he wrote about felt like me. Necessity is the primary reason people work. Those who find fulfillment and satisfaction in their jobs are extremely fortunate as the majority of working people don't. I mentioned the emphasis put on work and a different view is held today. Monotony has always been a problem in the working sector and I was reminded of some of my jobs by the switchboard operator and the gas meter reader he used as illustrations. I firmly believe the people of this country would like to see an alternate or modified plan.

#4 I watched the television musical version of Studs Terkel's

> working people. Since I had read the Introduction to Working, I could understand the people.... When I first read it I formed the wrong opinion of Terkel and his purpose, I realize now he didn't intend to be vitriolic. I never should have compared him to H.L. Mencken.

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After students have kept their journals for a time, they may be encouraged to review their entries and perhaps select one or several entries which they are willing to "flesh out" into fuller pieces of written discourse. Such pieces, called for once or twice during a term, could be treated as regular writing assignments and evaluated in much the same way as other finished papers. Students will vary greatly in what they choose to write about in these papers. Some students focus on one story and their reactions to it, refining their journal entries until a definite connection or focus emerges that, to them, reveals something important about their personal response as readers. Others will choose to select several entries on several works and attempt to show how their reading process seems to vary or remain the same from one piece of literature to another. Still others will become interested in tracing their emergence as readers who are willing to talk more directly and subjectively about their responses to reading.

In the embryo stages of journal writing, the teacher must be certain to respect the entries. Occasionally picking up the journals and responding only as another reader, not as a critic, helps. Such response lets students know that ultimately their reactions can be shared and that the audience for them will be thoughtful and non-evaluative. Many teachers find it helpful also to share entries from their own reading journals with students, letting them see the same process going on with the adult reader.

The journals can also serve as a catalyst for open dialogue in the classroom. Patience becomes a real virtue in attempting to help students become confortable enough to carry on conversations in the classroom where everyone hears the personal

reaction that previously might only have been expressed in a journal. As teachers, we like to believe that we have been encouraging personal response in class, but transcriptions of numerous classroom discussions about literature usually show that the "conversation" is actually a monologue, punctuated on occasion with Socratic dialogue. So, we have work to do here if personal response is going to be valued at all in the classroom as a valid part of the reading experience. One of the best ways to do this is to model conversations with students, beginning with some individuals who are comfortable talking in class. Directions for such open conversations are simple, and can be offered to students in the following form:

1. We're having a conversation, not a lecture; that means at least two people have to be involved. In the conversation, we're responding to each other's responses to the reading, not testing each other.

2. Anyone may refuse to answer a question if it seems too personal or if it seems unanswerable; we can do this by telling the questioner, "I'd rather not discuss that right now."

3. Anyone in the conversation may ask a question.

4. Anyone participating in the conversation may end it at any time.

Admittedly, such conversations take time and preparation on the part of both students and teachers. As strongly conditioned as they are to listen and not to respond, much less question, students will find the initial conversations difficult and awkward; teachers, too, will undergo some discomfort and a concern about how productive the first attempts are. Journal responses can serve as starting points for the conversations. Discussing what happened in trial conversations will help--even listening to taped playbacks of dialogues--to determine the key elements for a good conversation. The following observations may prove useful in developing a model and may also provide guidelines for students who should, eventually, develop their own "conversations" with peers.[5]

A. Getting Started--the beginning of a conversation should be open-ended; for example, "What part of the story seems to stick in your mind?" or "If you were going to come back to this story in three or four weeks, what do you think you will remember about it?"

B. Focus of the Conversation--the talk focuses on what the readers have to say about themselves and their experience with the text now that they have had time to reflect. For instance, one speaker might comment on the number of household duties a character in the story seemed responsible for; the other speaker might respond; "You seem to feel the mother had a number of duties--how does that compare with the number of chores your mother had to do?"

C. Keeping the Conversation Going--if responses are fragmented or vague, simple restatement of the responses or a clarification requested from the text itself may be all that's necessary to develop the content of the talk; as responses become fuller and clearer, summaries of each other's responses will be helpful and requests for more detail, additional examples, and verification will become natural.

D. Disagreements--no speaker should be hesitant about offering contrasting interpretations. Such interpretations, though, should be offered as personal response, not as final statements of fact. Differences can lead to interesting discussions if we remember to respect each other's personal response. Asking the other person to suggest areas of the text which prompted the contrasting interpretation will be helpful as will indicating what part of the response is purely personal and what parts are directly related to the text.

E. Ending the conversations--as the discussion draws to a close each speaker should attempt to make some judgments about what was heard. These judgments can be reflected in attempts to summarize the other person's views. All conversations should end with a sense that everyone was heard and everyone received response.

Organizing classroom study of literature to include personal response as the first step toward greater understanding and appreciation of literature and the role of reading in a person's life is not easy. But in many respects we as teachers share the same kind of problems that students do when they come to us. For example, Louise Rosenblatt in the following passage might just as well be describing teachers:

> Year after year as freshmen come into college, one finds that even the most verbally proficient of them, often those

> most intimately drawn to literature, have already acquired a hard veneer, a pseudo-professional approach. They are anxious to have the correct labels--the right period, the biographical background, the correct evaluation. They read literary histories and biographies, critical essays, and then, if they have the time, they read the works. [6]

Together, teachers and students need to remove the veneer that covers many of their classroom responses to literature and discover the real substance beneath, that of the centrality of the reader's personal response to the total experience of reading.

NOTES

1 See Charles R. Duke, "The Case of the Divorced Reader," English Journal (February 1977), pp. 33-36.

2 See James Britton and others. The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18). London: Schools Council Publication, 1975.

3 Adapted from Michael Piper and Joseph Comprone, "Literature and Composition," Kentucky English Bulletin (Fall 1981) and David Bleich, Readings and Feelings, An Introduction to Subjective Criticism (NCTE, 1975), pp. 101-105.

4 Taken from unpublished student journal, at Paducah Community College, Paducah, Kentucky.

5 Adapted from Agnes J. Webb, "Transactions with Literary Texts: Conversations in Classrooms," English Journal (March 1982), pp. 56-70; see also Robert E. Probst, "Response-Based Teaching of Literature," English Journal (November 1981), pp. 43-47.

6 "Acid Test in Teaching Literature," English Journal (February 1956), p. 71.

Note: This article has been published in Kentucky English Bulletin, Fall 1982, pp. 19-29.